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DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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November 24, 2008

MEMORANDUM

TO: State Board of Education

FROM: Kathleen Straus, President
Elizabeth Bauer, Member

SUBJECT: Discussion Regarding NASBE Study Group Reports –
“Learning to Work, Working to Learn: Transforming
Career and Technical Education” and “Beginning in the
Middle: Critical Steps in Secondary School Reform”

As mentioned at the November State Board of Education meeting, NASBE released two study group reports at its Annual Conference in October. As members of the study groups, we have asked for an opportunity to make a brief presentation to the Board on the recommendations included in the reports.

NASBE has mailed the study group reports to members of State Boards of Education. Attached are the press releases from NASBE and additional information on each report. Please bring your copy of these reports with you to the meeting (they have a copyright so we are unable to make copies).

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For Immediate Release

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State Leaders Urge Integration of Career Technical Education into School Reform Efforts

Alexandria, Virginia—State education leaders are calling for the complete integration of career and technical education programs into the middle and high school curricula as a means to offer all students a range of learning experiences that encompass academic, career and 21st century skills. The recommendation comes from a year-long study of the state of career technical education (CTE) in American education reform by state board of education members. The report, *Learning to Work, Working to Learn*, is being published by the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE).

The traditional concept of vocational education with its emphasis on skill training and non-academic instruction—auto repair and cosmetology, for example—has evolved in recent years into a career-focused and academically demanding 21st century workforce preparation program now known as career technical education. This transformation offers educators significant opportunities to expand the breadth and depth of educational opportunities to students both in their K-12 learning and post-secondary careers.

“The modern day career technical education program is not your father’s vo-tech shop class,” explained Brenda Welburn, NASBE Executive Director. “We simply cannot make effective high school reforms without incorporating CTE into these improvement plans. CTE prepares students to succeed in the global workforce and offers those students most in danger of dropping out of high school with multiple educational and career opportunities.”

Among the other recommendations that will be distributed to national, state, and local education leaders is a focus on incorporating CTE coursework into existing state academic standards and to develop multiple assessments to measure skill and knowledge attainment. The report also suggests facilitating partnerships between industry leaders and schools, better state recruitment and compensation strategies for CTE instructors, and improving the transitions for students from high school to their post-secondary careers.

The panel’s work was supported through a generous contribution by Crossland Construction, one of the premier construction companies in the country based in Columbus, Kansas.

The full report and recommendations, *Learning to Work, Working to Learn*, is available for \$14 by calling (800) 220-5183 or via the Internet at www.nasbe.org.

NASBE, www.nasbe.org, represents America’s state and territorial boards of education. Our principal objectives are to strengthen state leadership in education policymaking; advocate equality of access to educational opportunity; promote excellence in the education of all students; and assure responsible lay governance of education.

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Learning to Work, Working to Learn



Learning to Work, Working to Learn

October 2008

Career and technical education, or CTE, has its roots in vocational education programs that were traditionally skill-based and non-academic—shop, home economics, and cosmetology. But while vocational education trained students for jobs, CTE prepares students for careers. In recent years, CTE has morphed the traditional focus on technical skills for the non-college bound student into a 21st century version of workforce preparation—one that focuses on career and workplace skills as well as academic learning. On a broader scale, CTE is fast becoming an integral part of education reform discussions nationwide.

Several converging forces have thrust CTE into the limelight. Global competition is perhaps the strongest driving force, and one that industry is sure to continue to push as the economy of the “flat world” becomes more apparent with each year. Another major driver is the nation’s high dropout rate, especially for our most at-risk students. Policymakers can no longer deny that huge numbers of students quit high school and that band-aid solutions are no longer acceptable. The proven results of high-quality, relevant CTE have the potential to give our education system a much-needed roadmap as we wrestle with these challenging issues, pushing our policymakers, leaders, and educators toward a better approach to preparing students for work and life.

In 2008, the NASBE Board of Directors recognized this sense of urgency and charged state board members from across the country with examining the issue more closely. Understanding the critical place that CTE has in education reform, the Board urged members to join in learning about the role state boards of education can and should play in promoting career and technical education in state policymaking.

The members of the Study Group on Promoting Excellence in Career and Technical Education had two primary objectives. First, the group set out to identify and review the key components of CTE. The group’s second goal was to develop strategies for providing rigorous, meaningful CTE for the nation’s students. Over the course of the year, Study Group members met with education leaders who are delivering high-quality CTE, business leaders who are helping to define the needs of today’s and tomorrow’s growth industries, and other experts with divergent perspectives on career education. Specific topics included:

- Teacher preparation and licensure;
- Rigorous and relevant curriculum and standards for CTE;
- Assessments for CTE coursework and evaluation of CTE programs;

- Industry certifications and school business partnerships;
- Alignment to high school redesign efforts;
- Introduction of CTE in middle schools;
- Seamless articulation between high school coursework and community college classes;
- Career clusters in CTE;
- Access to and expansion of CTE;
- Opportunities under the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Improvement Act to support programs that lead to industry certifications and higher education opportunities; and
- Educating parents and counselors on the value of CTE courses.

From these discussions, the Study Group developed the following set of recommendations for state boards of education to consider as they incorporate the role of CTE into their state's overall vision and plan for education.

Recommendation: Provide meaningful opportunities for all students to engage in rigorous and relevant career and technical education, both at the high school level and in the middle grades. States should actively work to provide a range of experiences that expose students to career-related clusters, such as health, law, or the performing arts. This will allow students to focus on a particular career pathway or to explore courses across disciplines while simultaneously gaining a strong academic base. The goal is to provide exposure for students that gives them the opportunity to plan and to choose their own path in life, whether that choice is work after high school, a direct route to college, or maybe even work that's followed by college at a later date. No student should be faced with roadblocks when it comes to their career and life aspirations, and learning should be both demanding and relevant for each individual student.

Recommendation: Engage industry and community leaders in meaningful partnerships. State boards of education and business leaders should join forces to drive an education agenda that will promote 21st century learning: learning that focuses on developing our nation's workforce and its citizens. The days of business leaders writing blank checks to the education establishment are over. Industry wants a return on its investment, and that return is in the form of a well-prepared workforce. State boards of education should support the convening of other state-level stakeholders, such as the chamber of commerce, the workforce development board, the legislature, the governor, other labor-related agencies, community college and higher education, P-20 councils, and industry leaders in an effort to connect economic and education issues.

Recommendation: Adopt policies to integrate CTE and academic coursework and standards, while providing multiple assessments to measure skill and knowledge attainment. Also, adopt policies to recognize students for career-focused learning. Many industries have developed standards and core competencies, often with the aid of an array of stakeholders, including educators. A number of industries have also developed curricular materials and they provide industry certification for skill attainment. These are all important tools and guidelines for states to adopt, though care must be taken to align career-focused standards with core academic requirements. This latter effort is no small task—it is critical that career standards align with academic subjects to ensure transitions beyond high school, especially in creating pathways for students interested in pursuing a four-year degree. What's more, providing assessments that measure not only knowledge,

but skill and ability is an important measure for students as they move beyond their secondary education, either to acquire additional schooling or to enter a particular career.

Recommendation: Ensure seamless transitions for students from high school to postsecondary and beyond. This transition is one of the biggest hurdles for many students. State boards should work with other policymaking bodies throughout their state to ensure an easy-to-navigate transition of credits and skill attainment from high school to work and postsecondary education.

Recommendation: Develop policies to address quality, recruitment, and compensation for CTE instructors. Who teaches, when, and for what pay are perhaps the biggest questions facing policymakers and school administrators. There is no one answer, but it is clear that innovative, unconventional thinking is a necessity. Because the No Child Left Behind Act mandates highly qualified teachers for core academic subjects, states need to explore ways of incorporating skilled-trade experts into the classroom while continuing to provide high-quality instruction in core academics. State policymakers also need to address the challenge school leaders have in recruiting high-quality candidates for CTE teaching positions. Higher salaries offered by industry often trump those offered to educators.

Recommendation: Address the poor image of CTE with educators, parents, guidance counselors, and the public. Despite the shift from job-training in vocational education to career-training in CTE, there is still a stigma attached to the choice of being a CTE student. The new mantra of education reform is "college for all," and CTE has not traditionally fit that mold. New changes to the Perkins Act, however, have cleared the road-blocks to linking academic coursework with career-focused learning, allowing high school students to both prepare for college and for careers. What is needed at this stage is an aggressive campaign to educate school administrators, teachers, guidance counselors, parents, and students about the promise of high-quality, rigorous CTE programs. Policymakers and business leaders will have to convince those with doubts that CTE is a viable option for preparing students for work and life.

For Immediate Release

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State Leaders Call for More Attention on Middle Grades to Ensure High School Success

Alexandria, Virginia—A national panel of state education leaders is unveiling a set of policy recommendations for middle grade reforms to better prepare students for high school success. The proposals, being issued by the National Association of State Boards of Education to national, state, and local education policymakers, are intended to focus greater attention on these grades and to counteract what the task force called the “benign neglect” of educators and the public to these adolescent years.

“The early secondary years—grades 6, 7, and 8—are the ‘Bermuda Triangle’ for students’ educational progress, and for education reformers who find it extremely challenging to implement effective improvement initiatives in this area of the K-12 continuum,” observed NASBE Executive Director Brenda Welburn. “Whether students later thrive or falter in high school is largely determined at this time, making improvements in these areas critical if we are to increase high school achievement overall,” she said.

There is a growing realization among educators that these early transition years are more important than ever in maintaining the academic growth most students exhibit coming out of elementary school, and that these middle grades can profoundly impact later high school success.

For many students, academic and social problems begin to manifest themselves during the middle years, and many who lose their way in high school often first get lost in sixth through eighth grade. Social, psychological, and learning factors all converge to make the early secondary student a unique individual and education policymakers must recognize this fact as they craft strategies to serve these students.

The recommendations for state leaders included in the task force’s report, *Beginning in the Middle. Critical Steps in Secondary School Reform*, are to:

- Review the current status of early secondary education.
- Require all teachers to receive training in the psycho-social development of students.
- Consider new transition models such as flexible scheduling, virtual schools, vertical teaming and peer connections in orientations.
- Early interventions beginning in the sixth grade.

But the most important recommendation is better personal attention to students. “Engagement, based on student involvement across many dimensions, may be the single most critical element in student achievement. Engagement at the classroom level is critical and is a function of the teacher and the educational context within which the student works,” the report states.

The full report and recommendations, *Beginning in the Middle: Critical Steps in Secondary School Reform*, is available for \$14 by calling (800) 220-5183 or via the Internet at www.nasbe.org.

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Beginning in the Middle



Beginning in the Middle

October 2008

Every day, 20 million students who can only be described as diverse, changing, and reactive 10- to 15-year-olds walk through the doors of our nation's middle schools. Whether the configuration is grade 4 to 6, 5 to 8, or some other iteration, these students are making critical and complex life choices that will affect their academic and social options for the remainder of their lives. Of equal if not greater importance is the reality that for nearly a quarter of these students, the seeds of withdrawal from school and the life-long consequences of under-employment, limited income, and involvement with the justice system are planted in these early secondary years.

These critical life-choices, coupled with a tug-of-war over the "best" configuration for all students, the need to ensure that students enter upper secondary school with the skills to succeed, and the knowledge that the majority of the critical "transition" points occur in the early secondary years led the NASBE Board of Directors to create the Study Group on Early Secondary Education. For the past several years, America has worked to re-design its high schools. We have invested in curricular reform, raised standards and graduation requirements, and pushed our high schools to assume a global perspective. Yet the "critical middle" has often been ignored, both financially and programmatically. As the research on achievement and dropouts shows, this "benign neglect" is a practice that spells trouble not only for early secondary education, but especially for the high schools we are trying to reform.

Issues for Middle Schools

According to the National Middle Schools Association, in 2000 there were 8,371 middle schools in the United States with a grade 6 to 8 configuration. Including all possible grade configurations would bring the total to 14,107 middle schools.¹ Results from the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exams show some modest achievement gains for middle school students: though reading levels have been relatively flat, the percentage of 8th grade students scoring at or above basic in math has increased by 10 points over the last decade.

But looking a bit deeper provides a more troubling picture of what these achievement levels and a host of other issues mean in a broader context—and helps layout a framework for the challenges facing middle school educators and policymakers alike. It is in the early secondary years, for example, "that students' progress slows, performance declines, and gaps persist," as one state's middle schools report puts it.² This is particularly true in math. On the 2007 NAEP math exam, 38 percent of 4th grade students scored at the proficient level or above.³ But for 8th graders, only 32 percent achieved proficiency or above. The same Beginning in the Middle exam showed that the white–nority achievement gaps also widened between 4th and 8th grade.*